

# Populism and Democracy in Europe

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Populism as a political event has reached a global momentum during the last few years, as testified by the arrival of Donald Trump to the United States presidency in 2017. However, populism is also growing in Europe as shown by the unexpected Brexit outcome. The success of populism in Europe is not, like perhaps in America, a new phenomenon that comes almost unexpectedly. Populism in Europe can be traced back in preceding waves before arriving to its present pervading presence. Like in America, European populism has raised the banner of returning political power to the people. But its present pervasive success is the effect of a movement that began decades ago. My aim in this chapter is to show if this promise of returning power to the people leads to an improvement of democracy or to sheer authoritarianism in the European lands.

## *Two concepts of Populism*

There is much discussion in the social sciences on the value of the concept of “populism”. For many scholars, populism is a derogatory word with no neutral meaning that should be avoided. This concept, according to these critics, is employed in everyday language to discredit all social movements or political parties aimed at the transformation of the established system, what they term a “flawed” or “fake” democracy, into a real one. In this vision, populism is the word employed by the defenders of oligarchical domination to discredit its critics. Thus, the word should be avoided on the basis that it has no descriptive value nor practical utility, given that it is a mere tool to delegitimise those movements that look for a more real democracy.

On the other hand, many others maintain that the concept populism makes a difference and that it is necessary to use the word to illuminate a specific phenomenon that cannot be appropriately analysed without employing this term. In this alternative view, the concept populism is very valuable to name those political movements that have the specific feature of not pursuing an arrangement between the contending interests in a democratic society but that understand politics as a permanent conflict between irreconcilable enemies. Many of these movements term this understanding of politics as *the political* following Carl Schmitt, the controversial political theorist. In his view, the basic divide of the political is between friends and foes, and in the populist understanding of politics, between the good virtuous people and the enemies of the people (the oligarchy, the caste).

Certainly, politics as an activity orientated to reach agreement is necessary because conflict makes part of the perennial human condition, and given that conflict needs to be managed to avoid violence, politics is the remedy to achieve concord. But according to the populist vision, the field of politics is not made of a variety of conflicts and demands that change along the time; politics, to them, is the permanent battlefield of two single actors, enemies beyond reconciliation, that are identified in moral terms: a virtuous people with a single will (*general*, in the language of Rousseau); and a corrupt elite, an oligarchy, named usually *caste*. The politics of populism, according to second understanding of the word mentioned above, is the politics of those movements or parties that speak in the name of the people against the enemies of the people (domestic or foreign). Once in government, the populists will present themselves as the only legitimate voice of the people and as the arm to eject their will. I will explain later if this can be seen as an improved democracy or as sheer authoritarianism.

Thus, in this chapter I will mean by populism (and by populist parties) that or those movements or political parties that understand politics as an unsurmountable conflict, zero sum, between the people and their enemies. In the populist vision, the people is always morally right; and the oligarchy is always mean and, for this very reason, does not deserve recognition and nothing can be deal with them. Thus politics as mediation is abolished in favour of and understanding of politics as conflict: adversarial politics. In this sense, populism has a core idea that permits to identify it. And having a core idea, populism can be seen also as a political ideology, that serves the functions of all ideologies. Populism is an ideology because defines a political stance from the vantage point of democracy defined only as the sovereignty of the people, and because it performs the three basic political functions of all ideologies. It gives a depiction of a political situation (in the populist vision: a democracy corrupted by the oligarchy); it realizes a political assessment of the afore mentioned situation (according to the populist vision: democracy has been kidnapped by its enemies, an unbearable situation); and finally, it provides a sketch for political action (the promise of populism: return power to the people). As we will see, this ideology can adopt many different forms in each of the countries of Europe and there can be even a variety of populisms in a single country, but the same happens with other ideologies: socialism, liberalism, communism, and so on. All of them have a multiplicity of contradictory meanings, realizations, cases and we do not let these labels drop in the analysis of politics. In this sense, populism is as specific or unspecific as every other ideology.

### *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*

It is also clear that the politics promoted by populism is not new in European history. We can go a long way back to the Catiline conspiracy, as testified by the great Sallust, in the first century b.C, where the poor were mobilised in revolt with the promise of the abolition of debts. Or to the more recent past of the middle ages when the revolt against tyranny was done in the name of “*vox populi, vox dei*”, were the people expressed virtue as rage against unjust government. But the preceding instances of popular will expression are rather scarce and its occurrence is connected to very exceptional circumstances when justice is broken by the rulers and the people restores constitutional order. This can be seen, among many other instances, in the play *Fuente Ovejuna*, by the Spanish writer Lope de Vega, published in 1612 and based in real facts of the time of Isabella and Ferdinand, the Catholic Kings, when the

neighbours of a little village in Andalusia kill in the name of the people the royal governor, a tyrant, assuming a collective responsibility. In this case, the death penalty of the royal authority in the name of the people is presented as the restoration of justice, but not as the expression of the collective creation of a new political order.

It is not until the French Revolution, starting in 1789 and specifically during the Jacobin time, 1793, that political revolt by the people is not intended to the restoration but to the creation of something new. From that time on, revolution is seen as above all as the instauration of a new political order founded in a general will produced by a collective political subject, the people, that no longer is the passive recipient of government but the principal actor of the political drama. This new political actor from now on is not the last resource of order restoration, as were popular movements in the past, but the creator itself of political order.

Thus, it is with the French Revolution that the will of the people becomes legitimate political decision. But also the meaning of revolution is transformed at least in two important senses. First, revolution is no longer associated with the restoration of a damaged order to its proper nature; now revolution is the instauration of a new order. Second, the people that had a duty of political obligation to rulers, that can only be excused against tyranny, becomes now a sovereign, which means becoming the superior authority that is not accountable and whose political will is always legitimate. This sovereign is different from the one of the *Ancient Regime*. In the past the sovereign was a single person, now is a collective person. In the past, the sovereign was not above the laws and if he pretended to use his prerogative to bend the law, then was guilty of tyranny. On the contrary, the new sovereign, the people, is never a tyrant or a despot: his will is always just.

This seems to imply that the government by the people is always just because good government is not about performance but about the person that occupies power: if the people rules, then the government is always virtuous, always good; but, if the people does not rule, then we have bad government and corruption. Without taking into account this new role of the people in our age we cannot understand populism because the core creed of this political ideology is that the people is the single, moral, and legitimate political subject. And it should be added that this single legitimate political actor is like the old monarch of absolutism: politically unaccountable. Alexis de Tocqueville was an early witness of this immense power of the multitude in modern times and coined the concept “tyranny of the majority” to describe it. To him, the people’s despotism of a democratic society was the most powerful in human history. Fortunately, it can be controlled by the institutions of democracy and by the associations of civil society.

### *What is the People?*

Of course, the people is a very abstract concept and it refers to an entity difficult to define. A people is a human group with collective identity, but this identity/difference can be expressed in many ways: a people as a group with blood bonds; a people as a community of language or languages; a people as those sharing the same or close culture. But the people can be also defined as a class (the dispossessed); and also, in its most inclusive meaning, the people as the totality of citizens members of the same political community. To sum up, when we say “we the people” we can express many different and contradictory meanings.

We will see that European populisms define people in many different and contradictory ways, and we will also see that the enemies of the people blamed by populism are also very different. In fact, there is no agreement between European populism on foes and friends. For instance, the Spanish populist party *Podemos* (Yes we can) portrayed Angela Merkel (the German chancellor) as a notorious enemy of the Spanish people, because she was responsible, in their views, of the cuts in social services made in Spain between 2011 and 2015. On the contrary, in the vision of German populist party *Älternative für Deutschland* (ÄfD, Alternative for Germany) Angela Merkel is portrayed as the friend of the enemies of Germany that is in good terms with all these “corrupt” countries like Portugal, Greece and Spain, that enjoy life without working thanks to the efforts of the good working German people.

Thus populism makes a peculiar use of the democratic creed, turning it in a political myth that promises salvation and remedy to all evils by establishing the true government of the people. This fact is very interesting in itself because shows how the European political culture, that become democratic after the bloodshed and totalitarian experiences of the twentieth century seems to have forgotten, thanks to populism, that democracy is above all an institutional device intended to find peace among those that are different. Putting this historical learning aside, populism defends, again, that democracy is not the remedy to conflict but that democracy is essentially conflict and political action is a war between enemies. And in this conflict there is no space for truce nor reconciliation because there is not a third way between good and evil, between truth and lie; between solidarity and selfishness. In the language of populism, political conflict is the expression of an antagonism, literally a position that is defined by the opposition to the other, and in this sense, the conflict cannot be solved by agreement but by victory and defeat. In the rationale of populism, people’s victory is the death of oligarchy; and the triumph of oligarchy is the enslavement of the people.

### *Populism as a Theory of Democracy*

These two models of democracy: democracy as a device that manages difference through institutions; and democracy as the statement of a collective subject will, were studied by the political theory of post-war Europe in works like *The Open Society and its Enemies*, by Karl Popper; *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* by Jacob Leiv Talmon; and *Four Essays on Liberty* by Isaiah Berlin. This last book was reprinted as *Liberty* and it is particularly relevant the chapter “Two Concepts of Liberty”. All these books had the practical goal of presenting a genealogy of totalitarianism to make understandable how genocide, holocaust, revolution and total war happened in the European soil. But beyond providing an explanation to the predicaments of that dark age, all these books contrasted two radically different ways of understanding democracy.

On the one hand, there is representative democracy, that was essentially connected with liberalism and that states the protection of individual rights as the essence of democracy itself. In this view, democratic political participation is instrumental to the protection of individual freedom. In a nutshell, political participation is not an end in itself and is not as such a political ideal. Democracy as the political expression of a collective subject that engages in a common will through participation is not a desirable nor a feasible political ideal. On the contrary, democracy is the protection of individual rights through political representation and participation.

On the other hand, they pointed that this discarded meaning of democracy is presented by some as an alternative view of “democracy” that more properly should be equated it with totalitarianism. The roots of this “totalitarian democracy” can be traced back to Rousseau’s concept of “general will”. They found in his work *The Social Contract* the political programme deployed by Robespierre during the French Revolution Terror. As we will see immediately, Robespierre’s criticism of representative democracy and his remedy proposal to the presumed evils of representation sound to our ears as timely and even modern. The aim of Robespierre was to put an end to the independence of representatives by bonding them under the control of the people. Robespierre assumed that there is freedom when the people has in their hands the reins government or, at least, if the people control the government and can make sure that the popular mandate is translated in political decisions.

Jacob L. Talmon wrote and comprehensive and detailed critique of this understanding of democracy that can be applied to present day populist theory of democracy: “Robespierre searched for safeguards against *representative despotism*. They were two: constant popular control over the Legislative body, and direct democratic action by the people (98) This democratic perfectionism was in fact inverted totalitarianism (...) It was based on a fanatical belief that there could be no more than one legitimate popular will. The other wills stood condemned *a priori* as partial, selfish and illegitimate” (104).

In the Jacobin vision, there is a single people’s will and this implies that the pluralism of society is not a fact that should be respected, but the expression of special interests raised against the democratic will that should be fought and eliminate. The very root of populism as an ideology, the goodness of people’s government, finds here the trigger of its political practice: the fight against pluralism. Taguieff has pointed as a main feature of contemporary populism a pendulum movement between authoritarianism and hiper-democratisation (2007, 9) but Talmon has already shown that the defence of radical democracy leads by itself to the enforcement of a single collective will in need of a personal interpreter. In this sense, hiper-democratisation leads to authoritarianism or totalitarianism because the people has a single voice that is incarnated in a providential single person.

Isaiah Berlin follows this development from the point of view of the History of ideas in “Two concepts of liberty”. According to him, the above mentioned models of democracy are connected, each of them, to a different concept of liberty. Liberal democracy has at its core the idea of “negative liberty” i.e. liberty defined as the absence of interference on individual action. Given that this liberty is defined by the absence of interference, it is appropriate to call it negative: less interference means more liberty. According to him, we can say that a person is free when is fully sovereign in his private realm and does not suffer collective constrictions. Berlin explains that this understanding of liberty is embodied in the institution of representative democracy: individual rights, separation of powers, checks and balances. On the contrary, the concept of positive liberty is addressed to be one’s master, to make one’s will. Of course, the very idea of negative liberty is logically connected with the idea that in the private domain the individual is sovereign, is his own master and, under certain circumstances, makes his will.

But contrary to expected, positive liberty didn’t make a contribution nor inspired the democratic institutions of government limitation and rights protection. Positive liberty nurtured the totalitarian claim that the only legitimate political actor is a collective one, the people, whose sovereignty is above the individual rights. Again, this idea draws inspiration in Rousseau’s statement that when an individual disobeys the general will he is disobeying

himself, and that in order to deliver this individual it should be obliged to be free (obey). For Rousseau, obeying the general will mean to be free.

Given that collective will is above individual freedom, there is democracy when this collective sovereign reigns but, as we already have seen, this is at the expense of individual liberty. In Berlin's understanding, this positive understanding of liberty, in its collective manifestation, can be seen in all the totalitarian experiments that dominated the first fifty years of Europe's twentieth century. But it seems that in present day Europe this understanding of liberty is back. Negative liberty stands for the humble ideal of being left alone. But the vulgar understanding of positive liberty has a pretence that today sounds like a respectable ideal: to bring back the power to the people; to obey the people's mandate; or, in Marine Le Pen slogan of the French Presidential elections: political action is legitimate only "in the name of the people". As we will see, obeying people's will is a popular motto these days in European populism. And it is at this point that democracy can mute into authoritarianism. Given that popular will should be sovereign, it cannot be limited by the rights that individuals have against the will of their own community (or at least, the fraction of that community that identifies itself as the people). Thus, from here follows the idea that in the name of the people individual liberty may be limited.

When the only legitimate authority is the people, it is not necessary individual's consent, explicit or tacit, to enforce policies against their right because people's will is the only legitimate will and is always virtuous. In this sense, populism makes democracy a device to implement authoritarian policies. This authoritarianism can find many ways of expression: religious persecution or intolerance; property expropriation; limited expression freedom or harassment of minorities; rights deprivation; xenophobic policies and many others.

#### *The European political arrangement: representative democracy plus social market economy*

Post-war politics in Europe main feature was a great consensus on liberal democracy and the welfare state. Both were intended as remedies to the evils caused by the industrial revolution social disruption: the social question that was seen as the main single cause of political polarization, revolution and political violence, genocide and holocaust, and war. This consensus on democracy and welfare was called the post-war consensus. It consisted in a moderate understanding of politics that created a shared model by liberals, social democrats and conservatives. But present day populism is not a consensus ideology in Europe, on the contrary, it is a conflict ideology: it is against pluralism, that is presented as illegitimate; it is against representative democracy, that is presented as fake democracy; it is against checks and balances, that are presented as devices that block majority rule; it is against political agreement and consensus because, in their view, there cannot be political accommodation between truth and falsity, between solidarity and greed, between the people and the oligarchy.

The only feature of the post-war consensus defended by present European populism is the welfare state understood as a large collection of entitlements, but this time they are not seen as a remedy to social evils but as rights that belong to a particular people without taking into account circumstances. It should be stressed that these entitlements are no longer stipulated as universal social rights but as something that belongs exclusively to a people. In a sense, the

welfare state no longer performs the remedial role to modern social evils but it is seen as a privilege that belongs to the “real people” at the expense of the exclusion of others less favoured by fortune: social rights should be given now as a property to an homogeneous group that names himself the people.

This new European populism is a vocal defender of direct democracy as a more authentic, real, form of democracy. The rationale of this choice is that according to the populist view, direct democracy means people’s will, and when the people speak then they issue a mandate that politicians should obey. This is the reason why the vast majority of European populist parties, either from the right or from the left, are strong supporters of referenda (or, to be more precise, of plebiscite) as the paramount democratic institution. Unfortunately, this view is spreading in all Europe, even in countries with a long and distinguished parliamentary tradition like Great Britain. But this defence of referendum as proper democracy is a real novelty in the European political landscape. Plebiscites (i.e. referenda impulse and organized by the government) were historically associated in Europe to authoritarian/totalitarian rule, as a way of undemocratic political legitimation and clearly were not seen as a democratic device. Putting aside Switzerland, referenda played no role in the history of modern democracy. On the contrary, as mentioned, plebiscite was above all a favourite of dictators to sustain personal power.

Current European populist leaders like Marine Le Pen support direct democracy as the finest example of democracy “au nom du people” and she promises to use referenda as a regular procedure to validate the most important presidential decisions and to make it compulsory to all constitutional reforms. Democracy against democracy makes part again of the language of European politics.

### *The chameleonic nature of European populism*

Thus, as already seen, populism in Europa is a fact that cannot be neglected, a new reality that came to stay and that will have lasting effects on European democracy as already known: a new and unexpected political actor that has come to change the political landscape of the European countries. This novelty of populism in Europe is best illustrated by the fact the classical book on this topic, Ionescu and Gellner’s *Populism* (1969) deals with populism in the USA, Russia, Latin America, plays with the idea of populism in Africa and Asia but Europe is not even considered beyond tinny and historically circumscribed spots. The very idea of dealing with a wave of populism in Europe is incompatible with the very spirit of the book. In fact, when the book was published none of the present populist European parties existed with the exception of the Freedom Party of Austria FPÖ (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* founded in 1956) that, incidentally, was not a populist party by that time. It was a pan-germanic liberal-conservative party. The FPÖ of that time resembles little present FPÖ: to begin with it is no longer a supranational party but an Austrian nationalist party that blame foreigners for the predicaments of Austria. The oldest populist parties in Europe were created during the 70’s in connection with the first crisis of the postwar welfare state. The French *Front National* was founded in 1972 and it is the result of the union of several tiny far right parties. The FN was born as a radical rightist party, but in less than a decade it changed in order to become a New Right party. The success of Ronald Reagan in the USA and of Margaret Thatcher in the UK, that created a new political language putting together the old conservative values and market

economy was pirated by the FN. Jean Marie Le Pen became then the representative in France of this New Right whose programme focused on the critique of the all-powerful state of post-war Europe. In the early eighties, the economic decay and moral decline of European societies was the fault of big state. Briefly, this second FN was what today is called a “neoliberal” party. Nevertheless, this capacity of ideological transformation didn’t stop at that point.

In 2012, with the election of Marine Le Pen, the daughter of the founder, as new party leader the neoliberal stance is abandoned and the FN becomes a party identified with the traditional French *etatisme* and with an all-inclusive welfare state. Under the ideological guidance of Florian Philippot, Marine Le Pen decided to move the party to the left, in order to capture the socialist and communist vote in post-industrial northern France. The basic ingredients of this new presentation of the FN are by now pure populism: a critique of oligarchy and capitalism; a defence of the humble and virtuous good people of France; the demand of a real, direct democracy as a remedy to all social evils; and nationalism, a defence of sovereignty against financial capital, globalization and, above all, the European Union. Taguieff points that the most salient feature of this new FN is “national-populism” but there is clearly something else (Taguieff, 2012). The FN converted in a left party with only one proviso: the enjoyment of this strong state and this welfare state should be restricted to “real” Frenchs and not to foreigners. Is the FN now a left-populist party?

Like the FN, Norway’s Progress Party (FrP, *Fremskrittspartiet*) was also created in 1972. The party was founded in the midst of the public discussion on the referendum to decide Norway’s membership to the European Economic Community EEC (today European Union EU). By that time the FrP was a conservative party that defended an anti-European stance in order to preserve the Norwegian oil wealth for the Norwegians and, in terms of domestic economic policy, was an anti-taxes party, sharing the same original position of the FN and the New Right. Its present anti-immigration stance is something rather new and the party today is less conservative and more open regarding moral liberties: for instance, same sex marriage. But today’s FrP political platform is far away from that of the party in foundation time: there is no discussion in Norway on EU membership but there is no discussion also on limiting taxes. Today’s FrP main ideas are the support of the welfare state for real Norwegians and anti-immigration legislation.

In Denmark, to complete the picture of the oldest European populist parties, the Danish Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*) was founded in 1973 as a platform intended to reduce taxes and had an immediate success: 15.9% of the vote in 1973 elections. But this promising beginning resulted in a long stagnation, decline and finally fall in 1983 when the leader of the party, Mogens Glistrup, was sentenced three years in jail for tax evasion. It is in this context of party crisis when the leadership of Pia Kjaersgaard is created. She newly founded the party as an anti-Europe and anti-immigration platform to finally abandon it to create a new one in 1995: the Danish People’s Party (*Dansk Folkeparti* DF). This new party is much more pragmatic than the precedent one and it is militant in its aim of influencing government. And it succeeded in this goal. For instance, the closure of the border with Germany in 2011 under the liberal-conservative government of Lars Lokke Rasmussen was the result of Kjaersgaard party pressure. The main points of the party manifesto are the defence of the welfare state; the reestablishment of border control; and strong opposition to immigration, all presented in a rather xenophobic language.

To sum up, the old populist parties of Europe, created at the beginning of the seventies were in the foundation time far right parties; then they evolve in the direction of moral



conservatism and economic liberalism (what is today termed neo-liberalism). Surprisingly they denounced the post-war consensus that created the welfare state in the name of individual freedom. In addition, in a further move towards radical change, these parties that defended morality and economic freedom, that were pro-market and anti-taxes in the seventies, change again in the nineties and at the beginning of present century to embrace a passionate defence of the welfare state against immigrants and the European Union.

The vast majority of the populist parties that are present today in the European political scenario were created in the last decade of the twentieth century, the time of the fall of the communist world. Some of them were right-wing parties in the time of its foundation but others were simply liberal populist parties since its inception. This can be illustrated by providing the foundation date of the most important: The Belgian (flamish) Vlaams Belang (before Vlaams Blok) 1985; The Italian Northern League LN in 1989; Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* FI was created in 1994; The Swish People's Party SVP-UDC 1991; The (True) Finns 1995; and the British United Kingdom Independence Party UKIP was established in 1993. Some of them were important in the time of its foundation but almost all of them become strong players in their political system after the beginning of the 2007 global crisis. In fact, some like Podemos or Syriza were created by the crisis (a complete analysis of present European populist parties can be reached combining the books of Grabow and Hartleb; Judis; and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser).

All these parties, after the fall of communism, played the role of critics of the post-war system. In the past that critique was impossible because the Cold War, but when it ended and the crisis arrived permitted them to present themselves as anti-establishment parties, as alternatives to the existing order and, above all, as political actors not contaminated by old politics corruption. Ironically, they even become critics of the neo-liberal policies of the traditional parties and vocal defenders of the welfare state that they rejected in the past. This defence of the welfare state (just for the nationals) is accompanied with a critique of globalization and, above all, a refusal of the European Union project.

It is during crisis time when many of these parties converted to populism and under the banner of defending the sovereignty of the people they displayed the promise of recovering the wellbeing and security lost because the enemies to the people (that go from capitalism to foreigners or minorities). It can be said, with qualifications, that the growing electoral support of these parties it's being accompanied with a moderation of its adversarial and demagogic discourse, but the effects of the populist success on European democracies cannot be neglected. The European political discourse is growingly becoming adversarial and polarized and the very idea of agreement and consensus is losing it's social reputation. The main effect of this discourse change is that European polities are no longer discussing political projects but in search of culprits to blame of present predicaments. The main consequence is an unexpected weakening of the European project, as the Brexit and Trump's position on Europe testified.

Moreover, what is even worst for the European project, these populist movements feedback each other along transnational European lines. South European populism demands more money for social welfare and blames the north countries for austerity. On the contrary, north populist parties blame the south for spending without limit and blame them for systemic corruption. Both populisms, south and north, demand a restoration of national sovereignty to get rid of European "bureaucratic" domination but they understand this domination in antagonist terms. It is said that northern European populism is "right populism" whereas

“South European populism” is “left populism”. The first is “right” because its main goal is to exclude (foreigners and Southerners) of social benefits; whereas the second is “left” because it is vocally inclusive of foreigners (immigrants and refugees) of social benefits. To sum up, Northern populism refuses to finance social benefits beyond the national community (understood in a narrow sense) whereas Southern populism is more generous with social expending. The problem lies in that it is, in fact, the north that pays and the south that spends, and this is the real difference, not left or right.

This can be illuminated by looking at the position of the left regarding the topic of immigrant and refugees in northern European countries. For instance, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, presidential candidate in the French elections of 2017 and leader of the left populist party-movement *La France Insoumise* is a strong defender of restrictions on immigration and opposes the arrival of refugees in France. Alternatively, to take another instance, look at Jeremy Corbyn, the radical left leader of the British Labour Party and his stance towards Brexit. He remained silent on European integration and almost silent on immigration in an effort to regain the labour feuds of northern England, the epicentre of British populism, where the Labour ex voters are now the deplorables whose revenge is changing the destiny of the United Kingdom.

In addition, it is not at all clear where the difference between left and right is. Some authors quoted by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart consider the Front National as a left populist party because it favours State management of the economy. Moreover, it should be added that today the Front National is the first French workers party (with more than 40% support of the French working class). Moreover, this is not the result of unintended actions. Marine Le Pen with the assistance of Florian Philippot decided to convert the FN in a leftist party, and as seen, they succeeded in a sense, although it was not enough to win the French presidency.

### *The crisis as window opportunity for populism in Europe*

The reasons that underlie the present emergence of populism in Europe are connected with the development problems facing the European Union project. The new world created by globalization since the 90's; the more or less domestic problems of the European countries dealing with the financial crisis that began in 2007-2008; and the cultural crisis triggered by the “demographic winter” in Europe and the arrival of non-western populations in culturally and ethnically homogeneous societies. In some of the European countries, this political, economic and cultural crisis was accompanied with cuts in social services, high unemployment, and political instability. Although all these factors do not correlate necessarily with the apparition of populism as the case of Portugal shows, a country suffering a deep economic crisis where populism is almost absent, there is a correlation between crisis and the rise of populism. Jan-Werner Müller says that Europe is between Populism and Technocracy.

The European Union project was created after the Second World War with the aim of providing a system where continental military conflict that was endemic in Europe, would be rendered impossible. To address this goal the economic interests of France and Germany were coordinated and other countries were aggregated in a long process that ended with present 28 member states (the UK still makes part of the project). The idea was very appealing for western post-war European societies but also to post authoritarian democracies (Greece, Portugal and Spain) and later to post-soviet central-eastern European societies because its

promises were big: the first was a lasting, permanent peace; the second, freedom served by representative democracy and social market economy; and third, social security and wellbeing provided by an ample welfare state (universal health service, unemployment benefits; pensions, education, housing). To sum up: the European project was a success history because provided security against war; secured freedom against totalitarianism; and provided a safety net to enjoy wellbeing. Europe meant security against all forms of modern uncertainty. This system was termed “post-war consensus” because all the so-called “government” parties of Europe were committed with it and supported eagerly this basic combination of representative democracy and social market economy beyond ideological differences: liberals, conservatives and social democrats.

The only parties that were self-excluded from this consensus were those situated in the extremes of the political system, the political parties of the far right and the extreme left. Interestingly, many European populist parties that have today quite an electoral success have their roots in the radical parties of those days. It is also remarkable that by that time they were strong critics of the “post-war consensus” for a variety of reasons and that today they present themselves as the defenders of the welfare state. Left radical parties were critics of the post-war consensus because they saw it not as the realization of social justice but as a device intended to demobilize the working class in order to save capitalism. Right wing radical parties were critics of the post-war consensus because they see it as disguised socialism under the command of a powerful state. But today, all populist (with roots in the left or in the right) blame the “oligarchy” for destroying the welfare state either by limiting it or by enlarging it to include foreigners, immigrants and refugees.

However, the defence of this national welfare state is not the only feature of European present day populism. They also rise the banner of the defence of a so-called real democracy against the “fake” democracy we already have. In their view, the people is no longer sovereign in Europe because democracy is controlled by an oligarchy that governs in the interest of the few against the many. In the past, when a group made a call to devolve the power to the people, revolution was the word. This vision was created during the second half of nineteenth century but was at its peak during the time of turmoil associated with the totalitarian ideologies of communism and fascism at the beginning of twentieth century. But today’s radicalism is disguised by the defence of the regeneration of democracy: populism prefers to speak of real democracy, and revolution is no longer in place. In the past, in order to gain a real democracy it was necessary to employ violence to destroy the establishment (the government, the parliament, the courts of justice); and after the work of destruction, revolution, then the people will regain control of their lives. Nevertheless, nobody speaks today in Europe of revolution; on the contrary, the goal is to re-establish democracy and not to destroy democracy. The populist aim is about winning elections and not to assault the winter palace.

### *Is democracy under threat in Europe?*

Although some authors like Foa and Mounk warn that the younger generations of the west have already made a “democratic disconnect” that endangers democracy (they mention a “danger of deconsolidation”) this statement is clearly beyond common perception. Certainly, the authors are worried that can happen with democracy the same thing that occurred with

the end of the Soviet Union: that nobody was able to anticipate its demise. However, I think that the lesson we can draw from the demise of communism does not apply to the future of democracy in Europe. The fall of the Communist world shown that communism was not susceptible of reform in a democratic sense; democratization was tried many times and the result was always the same: military intervention against democracy in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in many other places, because reform was seen as a danger to the sustainability of the system. What is peculiar about Gorbachev and his perestroika is that for the first time the goal of reform is placed at the centre of the system, and the result is that between 1989 and 1991 the system implodes without the possibility of an external restoration of it.

What happens between populism and democracy in Europe is not the same as with communism. European populist are not aimed primarily to the destruction of democracy and to the development of an alternative political project. Certainly, they say that the system was co-opted by the establishment, that is rigged, and that they will regenerate democracy. It is also true that they defend another model of democracy more perfect than representative democracy: direct democracy. However, until the present, this defence of direct democracy is more a desideratum intended as an improvement of representative democracy than an alternative project that pretends to wipe out representative democracy to put another democracy in its place. Above all, they say that its enemies kidnapped democracy and that they will rescue democracy to devolve its power to the people. Populist present themselves as reformers and liberators of existing democracy but not as proponents of an alternative political model. They want to be in command of present democracy because they present themselves as “the people” but there is not a totalitarian plan or ideology to deploy through revolution.

I think this point makes a great difference if compared with other forms of political radicalism that achieved great success in Europe during the first part of the twentieth century: there is not the messianic promise of revolution in present day populism. Populism promises something much less moving: to get rid of the selfish politicians that are making suffer the people. Thus populism in Europe is, above all, a political wave of anti-political mood, directed against traditional parties or, to use the words of Podemos in Spain, directed against the “Old politics”. This mood is nurtured by resentment against those that managed the country and the economy in a time of deep political, economic and cultural crises. This “old politicians” are blamed because the economic measures they implemented were unpopular, mainly between those that suffered cuts in social services and welfare benefits. The “old politicians” trusted that the effects of economic recovery would be enough to calm down this wave of rage and avoided the explanation of the policies implemented in the belief of a quick restoration of the social conditions before the crisis. But the crisis lasted a lot; it began in 2007-2008 and it is still present in many European countries, especially in the South. For instance, it took populism a lot of time to arrive to Spain, but finally it emerged in 2014, after more than six years of economic decay and escalating unemployment. Populism in Europe is the anti-political expression of distrust, frustration, resentment, and hate directed against those so-called culprits of present predicaments (that range from politicians and bankers to immigrants and refugees).

In this sense, the European populism call in favour of direct democracy should be qualified. When a populist leader says that he wants the voice of the people to be heard, he really means that he wants to put his anti-political language at the centre of political discussion. They

want to hear in public what everybody knows and the old politicians do not dare to say because they make part of the conspiracy against the people. Briefly, European populism does not represent a proper alternative to present European democracy. Of course, populism can destroy the European Union project, but this does not necessarily mean the destruction of democracy. Certainly, the political discourse today in many European countries is very ugly, very selfish, very parochial, very chauvinist, very xenophobic, many times islamophobia is present and many other times there is a lot of anti-Semitic rhetoric, but this doesn't mean that the European countries are less democratic today than ten or twenty years ago. In fact, The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2016 entitled *Revenge of the "deplorables"* mentions that there is at least one democratic virtue in populism in Europe, that consist in mobilizing many apathetic citizens that now are again interested in politics. These "deplored" citizens by the "liberal cosmopolitan elites" of the west are again participating in politics because the populist parties brought to public discussion their concerns, values, way of speaking and even dress code. Moreover, by doing that, they provided an alternative agenda to the one devised by the experts as the only way (TINA) to deal with the crisis. Perhaps *The Economist* is overoptimistic and the celebrations should be qualified. For instance, 50% of the voters of the French National Front declare that there are other political systems as good as democracy. Although it should also be stressed that the other 50% think that democracy is the best form of government and that there is no better alternative.

Democracy, liberal democracy, still reigns hegemonic in Western Europe as the only legitimate form of government and the institutions of democracy are strong enough to resist the assault of populism with little damage. Unfortunately this is not the case in Eastern Europe where democracy has a very short history and its institutions are weak. Political turnout is very low in these countries, and this means a weak commitment of the people with the democratic process. In addition, in some countries, populist leaders are preaching a so-called more democratic democracy that is celebrated as "illiberal". For instance, in Poland with Kaczynski's Law and Order party (PiS) or Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary. Both leaders are enforcing a so called democratic project where the liberal checks and balances are weakened in favour of a strong government able to fully develop what they call national sovereignty. This last instance shows that populism can have a value by re-polarizing the political discourse when the institutions of democracy are strong. But it also shows, that populism is a real threat to democracy in countries like Poland and Hungary because a government without control is a highway to, among many evils, corruption, persecution of minorities, harassment of the media, and abolition of the separation of powers. In a nutshell, to the destruction of democracy.

In the case of the above-mentioned countries, both are members of the European Union and in this sense, there is some coercive control on their governments that warrants the maintenance of a democratic minimum and the possibility of some future improvement. However, in the vast majority of the European countries, populism was not able to weaken democracy and the populist parties were constricted to accommodate with the demands of democracy. This means that although populism refers to an alternative model of democracy that in European history was instrumental in delegitimizing liberal democracy and in the instauration of totalitarian regimes, present European populism has no an authoritarian model to offer versus existing democracy. Although Foa and Mounk warn us of a possible "deconsolidation of democracy" in advanced societies, the evidences we have show that in the countries where populism was not "demonized" and excluded with "cordon sanitaire" policies, where populist parties were able to make part or to influence policies, democracy is still in very

good shape. Norway, Denmark, Finland, Holland and Austria are countries with strong and influential populist parties and, at the same time, are according all democracy rankings, the most democratic countries of the world. Spain has also a prominent populist party and it is also belongs to the “full democracies” group. Britain had a populist moment with UKIP and Brexit but the effect on democracy remains to be seen. However, it is also true that other west European countries have suffer a quality of democracy deterioration. And in these countries populism is prominent. The first example that comes to our mind is Italy, were populism was hegemonic during decades, and where now a new populist movement-party, MoVimento Cinque Stelle M5S, is on the verge of being the first party in terms of electoral support in the country. Democracy has also deteriorated in France and Belgium, but here is terrorism and anti-terrorism legislation that explains the decline. And the rise of populism is also reinforced by terrorism. Interestingly both France and Belgium demonized their populist parties in order to contain their political power through “cordon sanitaire” policies. Italy, France and Belgium are today “flawed democracies”; In Poland and Hungary democracy is declining given the sustained efforts by their populist governments to control the country’s media, judiciary, civil service, education, and party system.

### *Conclusion*

The Foa and Mound warning can be seen as a necessary whistle-blower on the decay of democracy in the advanced countries, but this decay is not the case today. However, this does not mean that the European democracies cannot collapse in the future, as happened in the past; and that the dream of a (totalitarian) direct democracy will not conquer again the souls of the European peoples as happened in the past. Nevertheless, present conditions have nothing to do with Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. The majority of the full democracies of the world are located in Europe; the highest levels of democracy are associated with European countries; the European populist parties are vocals defenders of democracy; these populist parties defend even the liberal values of individual freedom and tolerance. However, this said, it is also true that the European public discussion is today more ugly, more adversarial, more chauvinistic and that present European public opinion tends to blame others of the predicaments of the present. Instead of searching new goal and new projects, Europe is in search of the “bouc émissaire” that leads to frustration and domestic conflict. This can point to a degradation of European democratic discourse but it is no evidence of the raising of a new authoritarianism. Democracy is still the major bulwark against `populism in Europe.

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